

The Trail

I spent this past week backpacking on the Appalachian trail through Shenandoah National Park in Virginia.

At age 66, what was I thinking, spending a week backpacking a hundred miles on the Appalachian Trail (AT) in Shenandoah National Park? I was old enough to be the grandfather of many of the kids who passed me on their 2200 mile journey from Georgia to Maine. Any possible midlife crisis was years ago. Perhaps I was trying to prove to myself that I still can? Teasing father time? Or was it just my natural adventurousness taking advantage of an opportunity that passed me by when I was younger and had so many responsibilities.

The oldest person to hike the entire trail, over several years, was 83. And though the record is 45 days, most people take about five to six months to complete the journey through 14 states. There are so many mountains to cross along the way, it's been estimated to be the same as hiking Mount Everest 16 times. Of the over 3000 people who start the trip each year, only about 25% finish, and almost half of those are now women.

I had my first taste of the AT in the late 60s as a young Boy Scout, but now, over 50 years later, things have changed and I needed to train for this. A month before my departure date I started walking what hills I could find early each morning before it got too hot. I eventually started doing those 5 to 6 mile hikes with my fully loaded pack and my hiking boots. In addition, I kept working out at the gym to strengthen my legs and try to increase my stamina. I'm sure it helped, but nothing can really prepare you for walking long distances up and down mountains with a backpack than just doing it.

I met a guy on the trail, ten years my junior, who decided to spend a week hiking with his 30 year old daughter who was doing the entire trail (called a "through-hiker", as opposed to people like me, who are called "section-hikers"). He looked reasonably fit to me, but after three days he had enough and quit, totally exhausted. That made me realize how important my preparation had been.

In order to complete my part of the trail in a week, I had to average almost 15 miles a day. The horizontal part is not really that bad. For example, walking the entire length of Manhattan island from Battery Park all the way north is 13 miles. The problem is the vertical part. One day I looked at the Fitness app on my phone and it said I had hiked mountains that day with the equivalent of more than 200 flights of stairs. So imagine you walk that distance while going up and down all of the stairs in the Empire State building. Twice. With a heavy pack on your back. Every day. That's the part that gets you.



This was just one day!

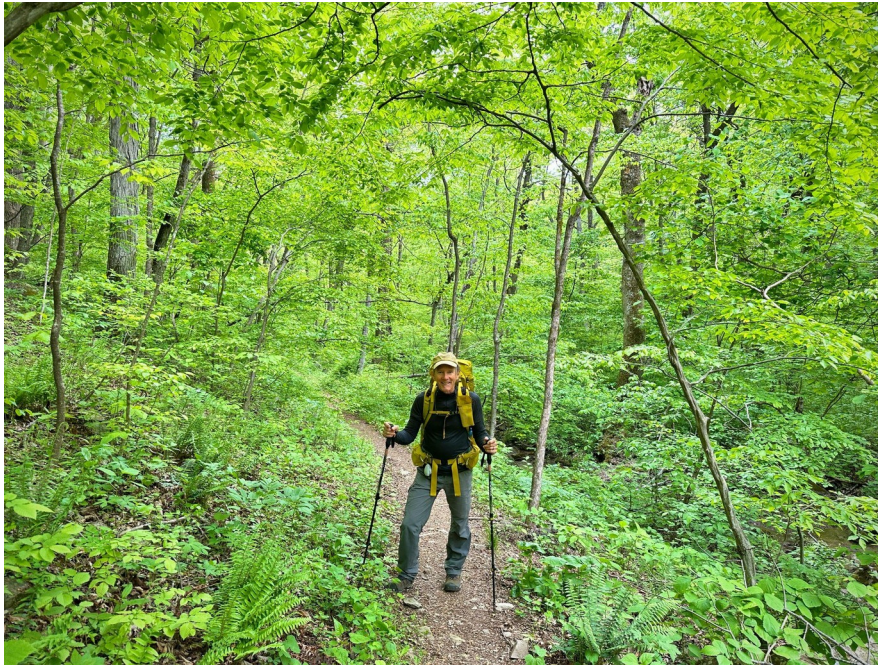
An interesting tidbit is that no one uses their real names on the AT, but instead they have "trail names". These new names can be given or assumed, but not once did I hear a "Bob" or Sue". Instead, I met people named "Super Chill", "Trash Panda" and "Listener" (who must've been given that name ironically, because he never stopped talking!) I wanted to take the name "Old Fucker", but evidently somebody already had that one, so I ended up being called "Florida".

The people I met were almost at the halfway point of the AT and had been hiking for over two months. They weren't all kids either, as I met a 37-year-old female pathologist on a break between jobs, a 40-something man, fresh out of the Air Force, and even a guy from England and one from New Zealand who came all that way just to hike this world-renowned trail from start to finish.

For them, the Shenandoah section was just another piece of the puzzle to get through, but for me it was chosen because it had a number of places within the park to resupply and get a good meal, and it passed back-and-forth across the famous Skyline Drive over 30 times, you know, just in case.

I hiked alone, as did many others, and sometimes there would be long stretches of time before I'd see another human. I would guess that 95% of my week was entirely by myself. Some people walked in groups of two or three, others with their dogs.

There were those who hiked so fast, they seemed as if they were late for an appointment, head down; making haste. I tended to go slower, averaging about 2 miles per hour, looking around, stopping to see the numerous and beautiful May flowers, listening to the ever-present birds, and taking photos of interesting things I saw along the way. I got lucky and picked a perfect time of year to be in the area, as spring was in full bloom, the temperatures were moderate and the mosquitoes had not yet arrived.



I was hoping to see a bear, but never did, and none of the people I met had seen one either. But we knew they were there, watching us, because evidently bears really do poop in the woods, and often right on the trail. Making sure the bears don't associate campsites with food was a major priority, and each site would have a large, steel "bear proof" container to place your food inside each night, and some had a "bear pole", where you used a long rod to lift your bag of food up high to hang off this contraption, out of reach from even the tallest bear.

There were 10 of these wilderness campsites in Shenandoah National Park along the AT, and each one, in addition to its bear deterrent, would be next to a natural spring, include an out house (newer ones were of the composting type) and had a small, wood hut where you could theoretically sleep. There were also several semi-flat areas near the hut where you could pitch your tent, and people would congregate at the large picnic table next to the shelter at the end of the day to swap stories and prepare their meals.

I arrived at one of these huts on a day when it was raining and decided I would give sleeping inside a shot. These structures are basically just three walls, a roof and a

floor, and one side completely open, but with a large enough overhang that the rain didn't come inside. The one I chose had a second level that you could hop up into, and I chose that because there was a guy on the bottom level who had a dog that kept licking me every time I was in reach. As you can imagine, the mice have figured out these cabins are a great place to find food, and I heard many horror stories about having them scamper over you in the middle of the night. Turns out, that wasn't the worst possibility.

Because there are no lights, and everyone is bone-tired anyway, things get pretty quiet after it gets dark, around 9 PM. So there I was, on the second level of this little wood shack out in the wilderness, with a guy and his smelly, wet dog on the bottom level to my right and another guy with food in his beard on the bottom level to my left. Just as I would start to doze off, one of them would commence to a snoring that seemed like it could shake the building. I believe he must have had sleep apnea, because it sounded as if he was struggling for air. As soon as he would stop, and it felt like I could sleep again, the one on my other side would start going with equal ferocity. They were unwittingly trading off, going back and forth, and it felt like I was a character in a Looney Tunes cartoon being slowly tortured by snoring all night.



One of the "huts" you could theoretically sleep in

Things that we take for granted in our everyday life, besides a good night's sleep, is that we can easily find food and water. When backpacking in the middle of nowhere, not so much. Water weighs roughly 2 pounds per quart, so you don't want to carry any more than you really need. It's helpful to know where springs are located along your path, and of course there's an app for that. If you see on your trail guide that there's a reliable spring 6 miles ahead, you have to have a good idea how much water you'll need to get there. In an ideal world, you'd arrive at the next water

source with an empty bottle. All of the water needs to be filtered for possible contaminants, and among many new camping inventions these days are tiny, manual, portable water filters. In the past, you had to use chemical tablets, and the end result always tasted a little strange. It takes a couple of minutes to squeeze a new quart of non-life-threatening water into your container, but it's worth it.

Camping meals are still freeze-dried to save weight, but they've gotten a whole lot tastier than I remember. You just boil the prescribed amount of water, pour it in the pouch, wait for it to hydrate, and then eat it right out of the pouch. No fuss no muss. It's amazing how good that stuff can taste when you're hungry.

It's also incredible how much you can, and need, to eat with all of that exercise. You can easily expend 5000 calories in a day, and if you don't end up putting that back in, over time, you're going to lose weight, which is something I didn't want to happen. In addition to my freeze-dried meals, I tried to eat something every hour while hiking, just to sustain my energy. The traditional "trail mix" is too heavy to carry, but I did have an assortment of lightweight dried meats, energy bars and dehydrated fruit snacks.

Speaking of food, one of the cool things about hiking on the AT is that people in the surrounding communities try to help the visiting hikers by providing free drinks and food at various places along the trail, usually where it intersects with a road. This is called "trail magic" and I came across one on my second day. There, like an apparition, was an entire troop of Boy Scouts with a huge assortment of drinks and snacks, along with hotdogs on the grill, all under a canopy with a chair for me to sit and rest my weary feet.



"Trail Magic" with Troop 555

This retrieved all sorts of memories for me from my days on scout camp trips with my friends, ending when I received my Eagle award at age 14. I showed one of the younger kids my trick for tying a bowline knot, and I learned about all the new merit badges that didn't exist back in my day. In addition to the old ones like camping, cooking, swimming and life-saving, they now require more, such as personal finance, civics, recycling, and just learning how to be a good person. This may sound "woke" to some, but to me it just seems like good sense.

In the 50+ years since I was a Scout, there have been a lot of changes in equipment, and I'm not just talking about my two knee surgeries. All of the camping gear is lighter, more compact, and of course, a lot more expensive. When you're backpacking, you want to have everything you'll need, and not a single thing you don't. At the end of your trip, hopefully the only thing you never used was your first aid kit.

In my days as a Scout, most things were based on old military equipment, so we had heavy canvas tents, cotton sleeping bags, and itchy wool blankets. I have a photo of me as an 11-year-old in my first Boy Scout uniform with a giant aluminum-framed pack, Army water canteen and a huge metal flashlight. Times have changed.



1968 Boy Scout backpacking equipment

There are lots of websites and YouTube videos that help you choose lightweight gear, and mine came out to 25 pounds, with food and water. That includes the weight of the pack, my shelter (a tarp), sleeping bag, inflatable mattress pad, cooking system, first aid stuff, extra clothing, rain gear, phone, battery charger, toiletries and assorted other items. It's a lot, and it requires a good deal of research and organization.

of cardio and work specific walking muscles, but it's difficult to even consider doing anything more after a long day. The hikers call it "T-Rex syndrome"--all lower body.

But most of all I missed Rachel. After 25 years I've grown quite fond of her, and everything is more fun and meaningful when we're together.

And I can guarantee she ain't going backpacking!

May 15,2023

